SOME TYPES OF IMAGERY IN THE POETRY
OF PAULINUS OF NOLA

BY

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It was at very nearly the mid-point of his life that Paulinus left the
leisured life of Ausonius' literary circle in Bordeaux to tend the tomb of
St. Felix at Nola. His literary activity, however, did not cease, but followed
the direction of his new enthusiasm; he poured material uncompromis-
ingly Christian in content and expression into classical forms, such as the
natalicium and the epithalamium, and created a new conception of
Christian poetry with the resources of his thorough education.

His bold imagination appears in one of his first undertakings, an
apologia to his affectionate master Ausonius for his conversion to a new
set of ideals which shed new light on the value of their earlier pursuits.
He sent Ausonius a long explanation of his reasons and their implications
in language which does justice to his new range of ideas but meets
Ausonius on his own level, that of a man whose interest in Christianity
was considerable, but not exclusive of other beliefs. Words such as
genitor or rex, when used of God, are carefully qualified by a suitable
adjective (10. 118, 287, 314; 137). Christ is described in a galaxy of titles –
... vis mens manus virtus dei, sol aequitatis, fons bonorum, flos dei ...
(10.48/9) – which combines familiar Christian descriptions (manus, virtus,
vens, flos) with titles of the sun (mens mundi is found in Cicero, Somnium
Scipionis 17, and Ammianus Marcellinus, 21.1.11; sol aequitatis had roots
in both traditions, which coalesced in the thought of St. Ambrose).

Paulinus goes on to defend his renunciation not as a waste of his life, but
a loan of it to Christ, who will repay with interest – a concept that can be
paralleled in Seneca (Ad Marciam 10), but one which it is unlikely that he
would have used when the general Christian disapproval of usury came

1 For the various genres of Paulinus' poetry, see Green, The Poetry of Paulinus of
2 Ambrose, De Tobia (C.S.E.L. 32.2.519ff.), De bono mortis 56 (ibid., 32.1.752);
Augustine, Enarrationes in Psalmos 128.6 (C.C.40.1884).
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home to him. Finally, after a long refutation of Ausonius' complaints — made tactfully in a literary style — Paulinus reaches his climax and vividly sets before Ausonius the possibility of Christ's advent and the general resurrection, and the danger of being held down to the earth by one's lower nature — an idea stemming from Plato (Phaedo 80e); and found in Cicero (Tusc. disp. 1.75) and Seneca (Ad Marciam 23).

The bulk of Paulinus' later poetry — the natalicia — might at first sight be classed as epic poetry, for Poem 14 has a long imitation of Vergil and Poems 15 and 16, a closely connected pair, begin with an invocation in the classical manner. Later, however, a different type of introduction is used, based on the world of nature; in poem 23 Paulinus compares himself to a bird. But epic-style similes are very rare: at 19.221 ff. Felix is compared to the morning star and at 20.208 f. a healed man runs like a hind. Both of these are Biblical in inspiration. It is in fact Felix who elicits Paulinus' most varied imagery, including the following in a thanksgiving addressed to the saint:

non pretium statui medico aut fastidia lecti
tristia sustinui, neque per scalpella vel ignes
aut male mordaces vario de gramine sucos,
saevoi tor morbis et vulneribus medicina
in corpus grassata meum est, velut accidit illis,
quos humana manus suspeta visitat arte
semper et incerto trepidos solamine palpat. (20.257 ff.)

This grim observation upon doctors' methods of treatment seems to be a new addition to the wide and pervasive range of medical metaphor. 3

In his later work Paulinus assumed an audience more familiar with the language and thought-processes of Christianity. In allegory his fertility was second to none. This technique is applied not only to the interpretation of scripture (as in his rendering of Psalm 137 (Poem 9), where he explains, as did his contemporaries, the battering of children as the mortification of the Christian's sins) but also to the events from everyday life that characterise his poetry. Just as his longest prose letter (23) was an allegorical development of the theme of his recent haircut, so the transformation of a building site from unsightly rubble to a finished edifice symbolises Paulinus' own ambition to be edified (Poem 28.279 ff.); and the ship carrying Nicetas home represents the temporary vehicle of the flesh (17.179/80), in an implicit pun on caro and carina which is reminis-